

## Listening

Monday, January 3rd, 2011

“The more deeply you understand other people, the more you will appreciate them, the more reverent you will feel toward them.” **Stephen Covey**

Imagine a person you know, a real person, who is not a very good listener. What is it like when you talk to him? What does he do? Chances are, he cuts you off in mid-sentence. He might look bored while you talk. Whenever you start to talk, he might look as if he can't wait to share his thoughts and words. His actions make you feel as if he doesn't think what you say holds much meaning or interest. He might even look as if he thinks he is much smarter than you.

Now imagine a real person you know who is a great listener. Chances are when you talk to her, she lets you have the floor. She appears to be curious and interested in what you have to say. Her actions make you feel your words and ideas are important; she makes you feel you count; that you are valuable.

Leaving aside every other characteristic of these two people (their intelligence, leadership skills, gender, ethics, etc.), chances are you have a better opinion of the person who listens than of the one who cuts you off — just because she listens to you.

Not surprisingly, much has been written about listening. If you pick up a book about leadership or relationship building, more than likely, there will be a chapter on listening. We are given lots of information and recommendations for how to be good listeners. Good listeners make eye contact; they empathize; they paraphrase; their body language reflects back the stance of the speaker. Good listeners get inside the paradigm of the speaker. This is all good advice, but I believe the heart of listening lies primarily in making a commitment to doing it.

If we really want to hear what another person has to say, just allow him to speak and process what he says. I believe the rest will take care of itself. That is, when we reduce listening to its essence, we primarily just have to stop talking and focus on the speaker. If we really want to hear what the other person has to say, he will know we are listening. It's as simple as that.

Listening is important in any relationship. It is important in leadership, and it is especially important in the classroom. When we listen to students, we

- show our respect for our students
- reduce behavior problems by encouraging a positive and respectful classroom culture

- communicate our belief that students have something worthwhile to say
- communicate our belief that our students are smart, valuable people
- model respectful behaviors that all people should demonstrate

I have found that a Flip camera is a great tool for observing how effectively I'm listening. Any teacher can get a pretty clear picture of how effectively he or she listens by video recording a class and then watching the recording. If you don't have a micro camera, you can record your class on a cell phone, iPhone, or iPod touch. With the right technology, you can even listen to your class in your car as you drive home.

In my own experience, confronting the brutal facts of how I communicate by watching a recording is a profound learning experience and a real, if uncomfortable, catalyst for change. When I watch a recording of myself, what I see is what everyone else sees every day. It is much better to suffer through videos of myself, and ultimately improve as a communicator, than it is to go on thinking I'm a great listener when in reality everyone else thinks I'm a jerk. Or worse.

Really listening is a humble act. If we listen to our students, we communicate that we are not the only one in the room who has something worthwhile to say. By listening, we also have an opportunity to learn by really hearing what our children are saying. When we really listen to our students, they often reward us with profound insights.